

People & Development

COSTFORD Publication

4

September-October 1991



C
Achutha
Menon

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“The King is dead.

In England there is always a ruling Monarch. The very second the old monarch dies the legal successor is automatically the new ruling monarch. His age or physical condition or his where-abouts make no difference. The public Proclamation makes this very clear, "The King is dead. Long live the King." The statement of course refers to two different people.



Long live the King”

Dr. K.N. Raj has from our COSTFORD begining been very close to us. When Sri C. Achutha Menon left us it didn't cause us to look around for a new 'Father'-. Much as we miss him we immediatley say "Long live Dr. Raj".



C. Achutha Menon

K.R. NARAYANAN

Chelat Achutha Menon was a remarkable and unforgettable figure in Indian politics. It has been said of him that he represented socialism with a human face. I should say that what he stood for was socialism with a human heart. He did so through quiet and effective praxis without dogmatic theorising though he was an acute and systematic thinker; and without sentimental gushing though he was a sensitive humanist.

During his long career as the Chief Minister of Kerala (the longest for a Kerala Chief Minister) Achutha Menon implemented crucial reforms which helped in transforming the backward economy of the State and introduced the stimulus of a new intellectual awakening in society. Land reforms, nationalisation of private forests, enactment of Agricultural Workers' Act, the scheme of one lakh houses for the poor, a new industrialisation programme inviting private investors from outside the State, were all bold measures with far reaching effects. More unique was his encouragement of academics and intellectuals, the building of research institutions and the promotion of the science movement in the State, especially the creation of the Centre of Science and Technology for Rural Development. He did all this with decisiveness as well as astuteness and softness of touch.

Achutha Menon's life and work showed that the days are not over in our country when high integrity and honesty in politics and administration can be combined with practical genius and efficiency in implementation, and that principles and ideals can be pursued without losing in popularity or effectiveness. Indeed the manner in which the people of Kerala, and even people outside, have reacted to his passing away shows that in the encircling corruption and debasement of



standards, the people are yearning for politicians and statesmen of his kind.

Achutha Menon had led in Kerala a coalition government the core of which consisted of cooperation between Leftists and the Congress. It was one of the most successful governments that the State has had until now. Was he a fore-runner of the politics of the future that is taking shape in our country? Gandhiji once talked of "the beauty of compromise" in politics, compromise while holding on firmly to principles. Achutha Menon's was one of the finest examples of that kind of democratic politics. His was a politics that combined socialism with humanism and democracy with a militant social content. ●

(Courtesy - Main stream)



Our Leader and Guide.....

Laurie Baker

It is very difficult to write about a Great Man. If you make a list of his achievements it doesn't convey much about the quality of the man you knew as a person.

The way I am made, I retain in my mind what I see of 'people': their looks, their mannerisms, the way they looked at me, the way they smiled or the way they showed displeasure or disapproval. And so I have my own personal memories 'photo album' of Achutha Menon, but it is beyond my capacity to be able to convey in words how I shall always remember him.

But I can tell you about my first sight of him. It was long before Kovalam had even been thought of as a Tourist Resort. It was a quiet beach and a small village behind it. We occasionally used to go there in the evening to get away from noise and phones and work and traffic. We had our favourite bit of seashore, backed by palms and rocks and away from the fishing boats parked on the dry

sand - and so we could go there, alone with the sea, the sand and the reddening evening sky.

That evening the sea was calm and we swam into it and just floated, motionless, with all the tiredness of work and stress and strain slowly washed out of us.

Briefly there came a disturbance. The crows started up again, circling round and round as two cars drove down the lane which ended before it reached the sand. The doors banged open. A group of men stood around. They were too far away for us to see who they were. We sighed - was our peace to be shattered by a stag-party of men? But they all remained standing and silent.

One of them, shorter than the others and dressed in a white shirt and dhoti, slowly started walking away from the group and came across the sand to where a fishing *catamaram* was parked. Probably the setting sun was in his eyes as he looked across the water to where we floated. Or perhaps his head was too full of thoughts? Ideas? Problems? Slowly he sank down and sat on the end of the boat logs - quiet, unmoving, alone - his back was turned on the group of silent waiting men at the cars.

All present - the Man, the group, ourselves, remained still. I believe we were all doing the same thing - even though the group were probably men "on duty" - we were all letting the quiet and stillness and peace of an evening setting sun over a tranquil sea absorb and extract from each one of us the problems and complications of life that had seeped into our being.

None of us intruded on the others. I know I felt at one with that man on the end of the boat logs. I have no idea how long we remained like that - a tableau, not a movie - perhaps it was for only ten minutes - and then he stood up, slowly walked back to the group and the cars and off they all went.

Several years later there was another similar tableau. We occasionally used to go up into the mountains to an old Rest House we knew - it was always vacant and we would camp there, enjoying the "noisy silence" of mountain forests. One time we went there and to our disappointment we could see it was occupied. To our surprise there seemed to be the same two cars and the same

Tribute



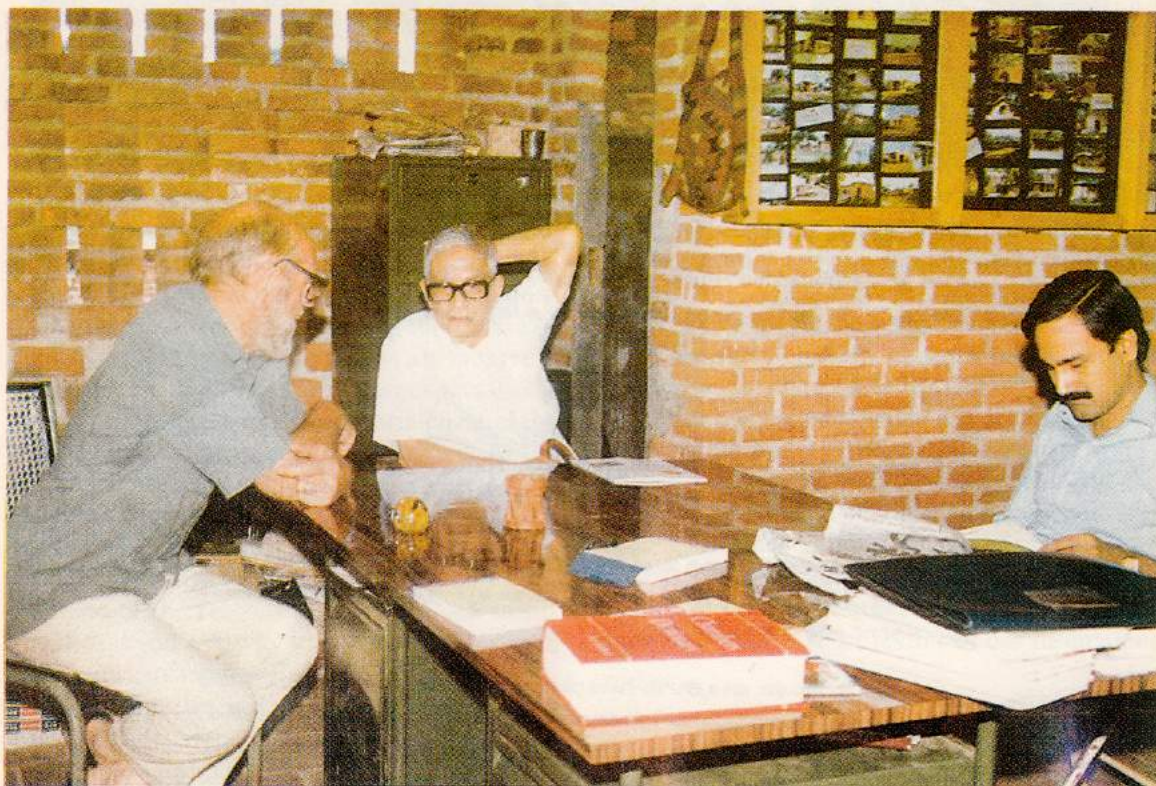
group we had seen behind the Kovalam beach - and yes - sitting alone and absorbed on a verandah was the man in white looking out over the plains of Kerala to the distant sea - the same quiet, the same setting sun - the same peace. It was too late to turn the car and retreat, and it was too late in the day to drive back through the forests and he insisted on our staying - so again we were able to share this quiet strengthening and renewal of our spirits.

And so, occasionally, we have met. Sometimes just to share, sometimes to talk out problems or schemes - always with few words but a lot of understanding.

Apart from these personal encounters he was the inspiration for COSTFORD. He inspired us to work quietly but concernedly for ordinary people. He did not want to be associated with any

organisation that merely sought and begged for money to pay others to do "Development" work - but for ourselves to be concerned for others and to Do things for improving the lot of those not so fortunate as ourselves. He taught us that quiet, steady, unseen, unpublicised work for others is of greater value to all, than work done for publicity and acclaim.

I think not many are aware that he had finally shed all his "official" positions and duties except one - he had continued in his own quiet wonderful way as COSTFORD's Chairman and as our guide and inspiration. We are grieved at his going - but we are grateful that he stayed with us to the end and grateful that he fathered us until he left this world. May his strength and quiet purposefulness remain with us. ●





People must have the power and responsibility

C. Achutha Menon

Today we deal with a very important question pertaining to the formulation and implementation of development plans in our country. Though lip service has been paid to the idea of decentralisation during the last three decades, nothing substantial has been done. Panchayati Raj institutions which are supposed to be the instruments of administrative decentralisation have not been brought into being in many states. And even in the states where they have been established they are not functioning satisfactorily. This is not due to any fault on the part of these institutions, but rather due to the unwillingness on the part of the authorities to confer enough powers on these bodies and resources to match such powers. This indeed is the real crux of the problem.

We talk a good deal about rural development. Unlike in the old days, a good bit of money is being spent in the villages on a multiplicity of schemes. Spending one crore or one and a half crore of rupees within the area of a N E S (National Extension Service) Block during the course of a year is no joke and yet the results are meagre.

Why is this so? There are many explanations. Large scale corruption, inappropriateness of the plans and schemes, lack of involvement of the people for whose benefit the schemes are intended, lack of coordination between the various agencies engaged in the work, bureaucratic functioning of the official machinery, just plain inefficiency are some of the reasons put forward. All this is true. But if you ask, why such conditions prevail, there is no satisfactory answer.

All our development plans are handed down from above, from the Union Govt. Ministry down to the State Govt. Department, from there to the district and from the district down to the N E S Blocks. All the work concerning the plans, of formulating them etc. are done at the top and are

handed down to those below. Those at the bottom, that is the actual people in the village and small town for whose uplift the schemes are intended have no part at all in the conception or formulation of the plans. And never in the implementation because that part is to be taken care of by the official machinery. Nowhere do the people come into the picture. This is the bane of our whole planning process.

Unless this is changed, no worthwhile social change is possible through planning and economic development. People must have the power and responsibility to formulate schemes for their own development, fight for allocation of resources for such plans and for their proper implementation. For this Panchayati Raj institutions must be set up every where in all states, they must be provided with adequate resources and also statutorily safeguarded against arbitrary supersession.

It is not meant here that everything will be done by the people, and no kind of help or guidance is necessary for them. Help and guidance is necessary in the form of expert advice in technical matters from social scientists, statisticians, experienced administrators etc. But the plan and the implementation must be essentially theirs. Only decentralisation can ensure this.

The problems that one may meet within the matter of decentralisation and how they can be tackled are the subject matter of our discussions today. ●

Summary of the presidential address in the seminar on 'Decentralised Planning and Social Change', held in 1986 at COSTFORD premises.



C. ACHUTHA MENON - INSTITUTION BUILDING IN 'BAKER' STYLE

T.N. Jayachandran

They say that the difference between a "Politician" and a 'Statesman' is this: a Politician is worried only about the next election whereas a Statesman is always concerned about the next generation.

India abounds in politicians but not statesman. As a matter of fact, the latter has become a 'vanishing species'. Shri. C. Achutha Menon who breathed his last, on 16 August 1991 belonged to this category.

Achutha Menon had Chief Ministership really thrust upon him, but having agreed to don the mantle he did not lose even a moment to put the administration on a solid foundation. He had a penchant for details. He ploughed through the jungle of routine administration with effortless ease, probably for the reason that unless one is able to talk the language of the bureaucrats, its well nigh impossible to convince them of anything.

Achutha Menon's first term of office as Chief Minister lasted only for less than a year. But he came to power again to stay on for nearly seven years. Even during his first term, his mind was set on the development of Kerala on sound and solid lines. Here was a 'problem' state with abundant natural resources, and considerable human resources of very high quality. Water was aplenty; but not harnessed productively. Electricity or at least its potential was abundant but under utilised. Percentage of literacy, particularly among women was the highest in the country. The number of degree holders of various hues was legion. Wherever they had gone, Keralites brought name and fame for their land of origin; they were considered hardworking, trustworthy, humane, hospitable. Yet, those who stayed back were not able to analyse the problems of Kerala properly; and much less to find solutions for them. This was really a contradiction and probably the only 'problem' of the problem state.

Achutha Menon set out to solve the problems of Kerala in his own inimitable style - calm, unruffled, quick, deep, analytical, objective and sincere! He perhaps felt that the real Keralites were outside Kerala. He realised that one of the reasons why they continued to be away was a severe lack, if not total absence of adequate institutional support.

It was in this endeavor to build up appropriate institutions that the now - famous Centre for Development Studies was born. It became a



reality due to the persistent efforts of Shri Achutha Menon. Dr. K. N. Raj readily agreed to come and thereafter there was a regular inflow of not only the best among Keralites but the best authorities on development in the world itself, to Kerala.

Having taken care of the basic institution for tackling problems of development, Achutha Menon turned to institution building to handle specific problems - the Centre for Earth Science Studies to deal with problems of resources and of resource mapping; the Centre for Water Resources Development and Management to tackle problems of water, the Forest Research Institute for finding out ways and means for preservation and optimum utilisation of Kerala's precious forests and the Sri Chitra Tirunal Institute for Medical Science & Technology to combine the best of Health Science and Technology ! His master stroke was perhaps the setting up of the Kerala State Electronic Development Corporation - 'Keltron' for short - which was probably the first in the field in the State sector for ushering in the electronic era to the country.

It was a subsidiary to the institution building efforts of Achutha Menon that the style of construction of the world-renowned architect Laurie Baker came to be adopted in Kerala under State Patronage. If I remember right, the first public institution in Kerala adopting the 'Baker style' was the Centre for Development Studies - its administrative office, library, lecture halls, hostels and guest house ! The best part of the Centre for Development Studies Complex is the Library Tower which proclaims to the rest of the world the intellectual supremacy of CDS.

It was a battle royal for Achutha Menon to have the 'Baker Style' adopted for the construction of a public building - a building constructed with public money. The prophets of doom were quick to work against this. What probably offended them was the possible realisation that we could have the facilities required for institutions at a much lower cost than we are hitherto used to.

They alleged that the structure of these constructions is weak and may collapse within a few years. But Achutha Menon withstood the onslaught of these modern obscurantists and saw to it that the stamp of official approval was given to the 'Baker Style' construction plan for the entire CDS campus.

That was not the end of the story. As a matter of fact, it was the beginning. The buildings in the 'Nalanda' campus for the State Institute of Languages adopted "Baker Style". So did the Grandhasala Sangham Auditorium. The support that Achutha Menon gave to the 'Baker style' of constructions was something reminding us of the zeal of the missionary ! His association with the COSTFORD ever since its formation is proof positive of his conviction about the need and effectiveness of Laurie Baker's efforts to take appropriate technology to the appropriate people.

The point that I would like to drive home is that the credit for enlarging and transforming Laurie Baker, the individual into an institution belongs to Achutha Menon.

There is nothing surprising in this because Achutha Menon has always been a man of innovation. More importantly, in his selfless search for what is best for the State, he was prepared to welcome anything new - new ideas, novel concepts, original methods. His mind was always alert to the needs of the State and also its limitations. His was a relentless and passionate bid to find out what is best, inexpensive, viable and wholesome.

'Baker style' of constructions has come to stay in Kerala. It has ardent admirers, renowned practitioners and acknowledgeable sympathisers both in the public and private sectors. A large number of residential and Institutional buildings have sprung in Kerala adopting this style and technology. It is good to remember that the protagonist of the 'Baker style' of construction in Kerala was none other than Shri. C. Achutha Menon. ●

"The growing number of environmental refugees today is already a rough indicator of the severity of global environmental decline".



REMEMBERING COM.ACHUTHA MENON

S. SHARMA

1. The light has gone - a silent spring of compassion, affection and concern that had been in my life since 1942.

My father was the first guide who led me through the path of Theosophy, from T.L. Vaswani to Mahatma Gandhi and then Panditji. He was himself an ardent Congressman. Then came Com. P. Krishna Pillai and Com. P.C. Joshi, the outstanding pioneers/builders of the Communist Party in Kerala and India who inspired me to join the Communist Party, fifty one years ago.

But later in 1942 and thereafter till 1991 Aug 9 - the person who slowly and imperceptibly took hold of me, helped me and encouraged me in all my activities, political, and social and even in my family and personal life was Com. Achutha Menon.

2. There is none like him. I have come across hundreds of political and social workers hailing from different parts of India - leaders and ordinary cadres working in different fields of activity. But none like him in his compassionate view of life, in his style of work, in the simplicity and directness of approach to his own life and others', and in his unique commitment to truth, to nature and above all to his fellow beings.

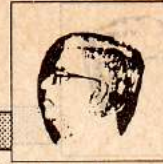
I can recall not one but many incidents and occasions in my life when Com. Achutha Menon has shown his affection and trust in me. I cherish all those events and moments of life as precious treasures that have enriched me as a Communist and as a human being.

3. One such episode relates to Com. Achutha Menon then the Chief Minister of Kerala requesting me to join him as his companion when he was invited by the Govt. of G.D.R. (then East Ger-

many) for a three week rest and recuperation there. This was in June-July, 1972. I was taken aback when Dr. K.N. Pai told me that Com. Menon must have a companion and I was his choice.

4. The three week stay at Bad-Elster, a sanatorium on the German-Czech Border afforded us a unique opportunity not only to improve Com. Menon's health but to study the multifaceted rebuilding of East Germany after the near total destruction in the Second World War. He took every opportunity to discuss problems facing the communists not only in East Germany and West Germany, but in France and in Czechoslovakia also. But more than this Com. Menon was keen to meet leading and middle level personnel involved in the development activities of G.D.R. in the areas of town planning, health delivery and housing, agriculture and the overall planning of urban and rural areas etc. Our hosts under special advice from Com. H. Fischer, that outstanding friend of India from the days of Mahatma Gandhi and G.D.R.'s Consulate General in India (India had not accorded full diplomatic recognition then) organised our itinerary in such a way that while we underwent the 20 days systematic sanatorium treatment, in between and after the treatment was over, we had ample opportunities to meet leading scientists, technologists and heads of Local District and State Level Planning.

Com. Menon took pains to ask questions relating to the involvement of workers, agricultural workers and artisans in their areas of productive activity, about district level and local planning processes, about survey and rational use of natural, renewable and non-renewable resour-



ces, about the functioning of the multi party political system that existed there then and the problems arising out of clash of interests and so on and so forth.

After every discussion we used to talk about the experiences in different areas among ourselves and consider what lessons we could draw from G.D.R., a small state in the Socialist World with a coalition Govt. of a new type. But we noted that the coalition Govt. was different from Kerala's pattern where we had to face a powerful opposition in the legislature as well as outside. The coalition in G.D.R. headed by the Socialist Unity Party had no opposition whatsoever, but what struck us was the way the Government and the leadership of the parties, the trade unions and other non-governmental bodies were united in the one aim of the overall development of the country. G.D.R. as part of the old Germany had potential resources besides substantial material and military support from U.S.S.R. But the Govt. at all levels sought to use science and technology, to tap and utilise the resources and man power for their rational utilisation. A country council in Dresden for example, had a geologist in their leading committee who told us how based on a proper survey of the resources of G.D.R. industrial, agricultural and services projects were planned and developed. Scientific institutes doing research in water, power, mineral wealth, and in health delivery and consumer goods were set up to help the planning and development processes. We noted that every village or city was developed according to a plan keeping in mind the preservation of the cultural heritage and conservation and regeneration of natural resources. We were wonderstruck at the purity of air & water, the freshness of vegetables, milk, cheese and other food stuffs which we could have in abundance not only in the sanatorium or guest houses but in the villages, and small towns we had occasion to visit and wander around.

5. One of the visits which left an indelible impression on us a visit to a city named Markenkirchen, the centre of musical instruments. There was a museum of musical instruments established in 1677. For over 1000 years traditional carpenters and instrument designers have been making sitars

or guitars - now they have been reduced to five or six families and being replaced by modern guitar designers who have individual and co-operative units for manufacture and marketing. At the entrance of the museum, two statues of cowboys playing flutes reminiscent of Lord Krishna greeted us. We were led into a three storied old wooden construction where in the different rooms we saw varieties of musical instruments of different ages, climes and countries. Drums, violins, harmoniums, guitars, veenas, and flutes made of horns of bulls, and of elephants, from Africa, China, India etc. and other types of instruments have been preserved. Two girls explained the history of each instrument playing them to our wonder and excitement. Com. Menon writing in the guest book stated " We are happy to have visited this museum of musical instruments which come from all the continents and range from prehistoric period to the present. How I wish we could emulate this example and preserve our cultural and art heritage !"

While returning Com. Menon was talking of what could be done in Kerala by initiating steps to revitalise the academics, schools and centres of literature, art and architecture in our state. The Record of Com. Menon's leadership in Govt. in the areas of literature, fine arts and culture is an inspiring example of what a Man with vision, knowledge and will could do in a State within seven years.

6. Another important visit which we undertook was to the research and training institute of batology and sanatorium treatment where we received mineral baths and inhalation treatment, mineral drinking water, regulated food and exercise. Dr. Herbert Jordan, Director of the Institute told us all about the sanatorium complex which was started as early as 1840. The teaching and research of the therapy using mineral waters, springs and baths is part of general modern medical education with a three year post graduate course in this speciality. The methodology of baths, massages, drinking water, treatment with hot massages has been developed for treatment of diseases of heart, circulatory system, genital organs, infection and degenerative diseases of the bone, arthritis and rheumatism. The institute is a



unique example of super speciality in the theory and practice of mineral springs.

Com. Menon evinced considerable interest in going round the library, the research departments and meeting over one hundred young doctors undergoing practical training and talking to them.

7. The 20 day stay in the sanatorium and the discussions we had with political, scientific, cultural and administrative workers left a great impact on Com. Menon. I found in him a student who was enriching his knowledge and widening his vision. His diary of this period (which is unfortunately lost) would have given us a full picture of what his impressions were and in what direction he was thinking of imbibing and applying those lessons to the development of Kerala.

When I look back today, I feel that the unique contribution which Com. Achutha Menon as Chief Minister made to the overall development of Kerala was inspired by the rich experiences he gathered from this visit to G.D.R. The different autonomous institutions which were his creation - the Centre for Development Studies for socio-economic studies of state's problems in the national context, the Sri Chitra Tirunal Centre for Medical Science and Technology, the Kerala Forest Research Institute, the Centre for Earth Science Studies, the Centre for Water Resources Development and Management, the Keltron and the Electronic Research and Development, today are a testimony to Com. Menon's devotion to people, to Science & Technology for development of the human being.

In creating these centres, he took care to preserve their autonomy, paying greatest attention to the choice of the right professionally qualified leadership for these institutions and so long as he continued as the head of the State, these centres flowered into centres of service to the State's needs and the scientists working in these centres had to render account of their performance to someone who knew all about the centres and who respected them.

8. Com. Menon was an intellectual to the marrow of his bone. Till his last days, he continued to read and assimilate from whichever quarter he could gather knowledge. He had great respect for intellectuals who disagreed with him. He would

want to know from them the points of dissent. Among the politicians of our land after Panditji, Com. Menon stands as the sole example of an intellectual-politician who respected intellectuals. Hence his capacity to inspire scientists, artists, cultural figures, political workers of different hues in giving their best to society. This mission of service to the common people and the thirst to seek out innovative methods for realising this aim continued in him even after he retired from active politics. The COSTFORD stands as a glorious example of his dedication to science, to ancient heritage and innovative synthesis of both to the cause of providing cost effective shelter for the millions of our country men. This he nurtured during the last years of his life.

9. I cannot conclude this tribute to Comrade Menon without reference to the last decade of his life after retirement from active politics. I consider that this was the most creative period of rethinking and regeneration of Com. Menon's political, cultural and social life. Politics for freeing the country from foreign bondage and building a new life for the people remained the main inspiration of his life. But he rethought the experiences of the freedom struggle and the Communist movement, here and abroad and came to the firm conclusion that "Social changes and revolutionary remoulding of our land cannot be copied from some model. We have to understand our own people, their traditions, distinctive cultural characteristics, our own history and scientific heritage and based on this Indian reality, evolve our own path to social, economic and cultural advance. The day we are able to achieve this, that day alone can we say that our movement has come of age. Towards this aim, we Communists have to learn not only from Marx, but from Mahatma Gandhi, Jayaprakash Narayan, Acharya Narendra Dev, Dr. Lohia, Dr. Ambedkar and drawing inspiration from their life and work, take our steps forward".

International developments and happenings in the U.S.S.R, and the Socialist World shook him as they shook all of us, but he patiently tried to study them and draw appropriate lessons from them. The series of articles he wrote on "Soviet Perestroika and Glasnost" are a testimony to the

Tribute



vital rethinking that he kept up.

Another aspect of his activity of the last few years was the dynamic support he gave to small or large groups of activists in political, cultural, social or environmental field. I have personal experience of how he lent his name and support to causes of children's nonformal education, protection of educational field from violence and narrow politics, community singing by youth for national unity and peace, environmental education of the youth and students, to movements for peace and friendship with Soviet Union, popularisation of Russian language and literature etc. In the matter of the model of development which India has to follow, he studied new trends and experiences of other countries and sought to evolve our own path of sustainable development preserving and conserving our nature and natural resources. From this position he supported the movement against the setting up of a nuclear plant in Peringom,

against implementing the hydel project at Pooyamkutty at the cost of precious forest wealth and displacement of human beings and all such issues that had bearing with the protection of environment.

10. Com. Menon during the last few years flowered into a full human being - a fount of spiritual, moral and material support to whosoever went to him for advice and inspiration, to whichever political group they belonged. He, unlike other political leaders, or administrators, studied the letters he used to receive for advice or help and left no letter unanswered till the last day. This was his style of work for over six decades.

The sense of loss that people who knew him intimately or at distance experience today is the tribute to this man the like of whom we have none today. ●

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Foot prints on the sands of time....

A reverential look at the life and times of Sri. C. Achutha Menon by COSTFORD team.

Today we live in a world of make-believe.

Moral bankruptcy has percolated to all spheres of public life. That simple quality called basic human goodness has almost disappeared from society. The scenario is bleak all around.

What provides the guiding light to human souls lost in this darkness are the lives and messages of a handful of great men. Men who refuse to be swept away by the tides of moral degeneration and venture to swim against it. To this category belonged C. Achutha Menon. He was the embodiment of truthfulness, sincerity and all those Gandhian values of yore about which we can now only reminisce with nostalgia. By the example of his life, he helped the common people of Kerala to sustain their faith in humanity.

What was so special about him that his demise should send society brooding in silent introspection? What enabled him to extract so much respect from all those around him? Who was this man anyway? And what was his message?

The search for the answers to these questions will lead us to the cherished ideals of a generation that has passed, but their ideals have attained immortality.

The life of Achutha Menon is an open book. Born in 1913 into a lower-middle class family, the early part of his life was spent at Thrissur. As a student he was brilliant. When he passed the Matriculation Examination in 1929, he stood first in the princely state of Cochin. Later he became a B. A. with honours from St. Thomas College, Thrissur. After graduation, he moved to Thiruvananthapuram to study Law. Once again, he passed with flying colours.

The late thirties saw Achutha Menon practising Law at Thrissur. However, in spite of his

brilliance as a student and the gold medals he won for Law, he was a failure as a barrister. He was unambitious and utterly lacked direction when it came to building up a career for himself. But the years at the bar were a turning point in his life, for it was at this time that he became involved in active politics.





With the famous Electricity Corporation strike of 1937, Sri Menon became a full time political worker. Like many a young man of those days, he found the call of the National Movement irresistible. Though he initially worked in the Congress and was an office-bearer of the K.P.C.C., the party did not rise up to the level of his radical thinking. He joined the Communist Party in 1942 and became a prominent figure in the party right from the beginning.

In the first Communist Ministry of 1957, Sri Menon was second in rank and held the Finance portfolio. When the party split Achutha Menon was made the secretary of the state unit of C.P.I. Later he rose to national level leadership of the party and was nominated to the Rajya Sabha. It was from here that he was called back to Kerala by an SOS message on account of the peculiar turn of events in the politics of the state.

The political and administrative situations in the State had been constantly changing. This made it difficult to make a meaningful comparison of the overall performances of the different ministries or of the Chief Ministers. Yet, we can say with a fair amount of confidence that Achutha Menon was Kerala's best ever Chief Minister. For

nobody else possessed his professionalism or administrative efficiency. He was learned and erudite enough to master the complexities of Public Administration within a short span of time. And to top it all, his concern for the welfare of the people was genuine and people knew it. All this motivated him to work with a steady zeal for the all-round development of the State.

The parallelisms between Achutha Menon's stint as Kerala's Chief Minister and that of Jawaharlal Nehru as the Prime Minister of India are striking. Both of them proceeded along the lines of a welfare-approach rooted in the principles of Socialism. Both realised the importance of instilling the services of Science and Technology for the eradication of poverty and the overall development of the people, and they both took imaginative steps to ensure that Science and Technology were to use and not to worship. Achutha Menon set up Kerala's first Science and Technology Department, and for the first time formulated a Science Policy Resolution. He also took the initiative to start a string of advanced research institutions that would help to take the fruits of science to the common people. In establishing the Centre for Development Studies, Sri Menon invited Dr. K.N. Raj who was at that





time the Vice Chancellor of Delhi University to come to Kerala. Such a strategy he repeated many times - inviting some of the best-qualified and most suitable persons and he handed over to them the responsibility of setting up the kind of research institutions that he had in his mind. After the CDS, other centres of excellence like the Sri Chithra Institute, the Forest Research Institute (KFRI) Peechi, the Water Resources Institute and the Centre for Earth Science Studies (CESS) also owe their existence to Achutha Menon's foresight and positive belief in applied science.

Perhaps his greatest achievement as Chief Minister was the successful implementation of land reforms. He wiped out forever the vestiges of the old feudal order that had lingered on in our agrarian system. Other noteworthy achievements as Chief Minister were the nationalisation of forest lands, the implementation of the Laksham Veedu program (a housing scheme for the homeless), the improvement of the working conditions of both industrial and farm labourers and the strengthening of a Public Distribution System. His personal qualities made him a leader acceptable to all sections. This acceptability was enhanced by his broad mindedness which was basic of his thinking and which was testified by gestures, for instance, like his participating in the Maramon Convention despite being a Communist.

Achutha Menon was an unorthodox Communist. He was a confirmed humanist, and his independent thinking and universal vision often made him look beyond party interests.

Much has been said about the so-called 'ideological shift' said to be visible in Achutha Menon in the later years of his life. After his demise, some newspaper articles appeared advancing this theory. Some said that his speeches and writings had shown increasing signs of disillusionment with the Communist order and an increasing ideological affinity towards Gandhism.

What is the truth about this? Sri. Menon's own article entitled "Jeevitathil Ninnu" (Out of Life), published posthumously in the Mathruboomi Weekly dated October 13-19, 1991, throws some light on the issue. Reportedly the last work of

Achutha Menon, the article takes a critical look at India's Communist movement in the light of the political experiences of his entire life-span. He takes the view that the Communist Party of India erred in the beginning by not venturing into any sort of original thinking. This led it to import *enmasse* a body of theoretical Marxism from Soviet Russia and other sources. The Indian situa-



tion had not been systematically studied or analysed. As a result of this basic short-coming, and of its perpetuation thereafter, the movement is now suffering. He believed that, what the Communist parties should do now is to be courageous enough to accept the fact that there have been mistakes, and try to correct them. The task of suggesting a concrete programme of correctives



was beyond his individual capabilities. He ends his article by calling upon the Youth of India to take up and pursue this task.

Though this article views the Communist movement rather critically, it leaves no doubt in the minds of the reader that his faith in Communism was firm. But, he did not equate his political ideology with the dictates of the party oligarchy. He sought to place Communism in a much broader perspective.

As for Gandhism, Achutha Menon had spoken and written on many occasions that he felt it had certain weaknesses, but he admired it for its positive points such as the emphasis it placed on truthfulness, moral values and *ahimsa*. He felt that the conventional attitude of the Communists to treat Gandhism as some kind of untouchable airy idealistic stuff should change. Its positive aspects are worthy of imbibement. This formed a major plank in Achutha Menon's proposal to evolve a new kind of Communism that took into account Indian realities. However, as an ideology for himself, Gandhism seemed far too passive.

Achutha Menon's intellectual pursuits were not confined to the field of politics. He was a connoisseur of the arts and his contributions to literature were often brilliant.

His entry into the world of letters started with a few short stories. Though there was nothing spectacular about them, they got a fair reception from the readers. However after having published three short stories, he stopped writing them. The reason was that in those days of gifted story-teller like Kesavadev and Pottakkat, Sri Menon felt he would never be able to rise to their standards. He then tried his hand at play-writing, authoring a couple of them with themes that reflected Communist ideology.

Achutha Menon's greatest contributions to literature were his essays and pen sketches. These were largely the products of his later life and carried the stamp of that remarkable maturity and seasoning for which he was widely acclaimed. His "Thoolika Chithrangal" (Pen sketches) which was serialised in the Mathrubhoomi dealt mainly with his reminiscences about persons, both famous and not-so-famous. "Ente Balyakala Smaranakal" (My Childhood Memories) was an autobiographical work, noteworthy for its sincerity and human feeling. He also made some excellent translations including H.G. Wells' "A short History of the World".

What did writing mean to Achutha Menon? This he explains in his book "Ente Sahitya Jeevitham" (My Literary Life), published in 1990.





According to him, a writer's work should have its roots in his personal feeling and experiences. Then only can his writings be sincere. Any borrowed ornamentation will wither away; only what is one's own is sustainable. This sincerity together with his uncomplicated style made him a widely read writer, though the subjects which he usually wrote about were never meant to be for light reading.

The people of Kerala had known Achutha Menon in his roles as a politician and as their Chief Minister and had admired him. After he stepped down from power in 1977 and moved to Thrissur to lead a retired life, we began to see him in a new perspective. As a human being, he concerned himself with all that was happening around him. He did not lack what our generation lacks - the ability to respond. Whenever he felt justice

and human dignity were being threatened, he raised his voice. To many human rights and environment movements, he was an inspiration and a motivation. Moral decay in public life worried him deeply and he frequently wrote on the need for maintaining moral values and ethics, often chiding politicians and trying to reassure the common man.

Achutha Menon was the incarnation of all those moral lessons that his generation learned from its experiences and he wished to leave them to his successors to imbibe. For more than half a century, he enriched by his presence and his being the social, political and cultural life of Kerala. He left us on the 16th of August, leaving behind, like all great men, the example of a full and fruitful life for others to emulate. ●

(Compiled by P.N. Ranjit Kumar)



TRIBUTE

K.V.Surendranath

The sad demise of Shri. C. Achutha Menon is for Kerala's Science and Technology movement, a grievous loss.

Kerala, under the stewardship of Sri. Achutha Menon, was the first state in India to formulate and adopt a statement of Science policy. And that in the early seventies when India was just waking up to the "third wave" which was sweeping the world.

The visionary that he was, he had foreseen the crucial role that Science and Technology could play in transforming the semi-colonial social system we had inherited. He also wanted to see established Centers of Science and Technology in the various areas of social endeavour which could generate and make available to the people the blessings of Science and Technology for a better life.

The 'centres of excellence' which we have in Kerala today are, the results of Sri. Achutha Menon's striving in this regard. The Centre for Development Studies at Trivandrum which has earned international esteem, the Sri. Chitra

Centre for Medical Science and Technology which is one of the pioneering institution of its kind, the Kerala Forest Research Institute which is the only one at the State level anywhere in India, the Centre for Water Resources, Development and Management..... all these are his "brain children", if one may say so.

The story goes that it was Sri. Menon who actually persuaded a reluctant Dr. K.N. Raj to come back to Kerala and organise the CDS here.

It was with a crusading zeal that Sri. Menon set about popularising the "Baker Model" house building silencing the cynics and the incorrigibles.

But for him, the Sri Chitra Centre would have continued just as another Cardiology - Neurology clinic and no more.

A few weeks before Sri Menon's demise the CDS observed its twentieth birth anniversary. The organisers knew that he was in Trivandrum and thought it proper to extend to him an invitation. However, knowing that he was under strict medical order not to move out of home, they never expected him at the function. But, to their surprise, as the function was about to start, there appeared before them Sri. Menon. He remained there for the entire day, all attention to the proceedings of the seminar that discussed the vital problems of our polity.

The Centre of Science and Technology for Rural Development had the good fortune of having Sri Achutha Menon as its Chairman. Low cost housing, airy neat and congenial for the millions that form our rural poor was a dream that was close to his heart. And he found a gifted colleague in Sri. Laurie Baker. COSTFORD has demonstrated by its work, whether it be housing, energy, sanitation or rural water management, demonstrated that it can be of great assistance to the rural population.

It is in the fitness of things that 'Saketham' the house that Sri Menon built at Thrissur now accommodate the Headquarters of COSTFORD. ●

"Sudden accidents, such as a rail crash, fire, or explosion, can instantaneously confer upon thousands of people the status of environmental refugee."

**World Habitat Day**

Monday, 7 October 1991

Shelter and the Living Environment**DO THE POOR NEED TO DIE
YOUNG ?**

This year more than 15 million children under the age of five will die - ninety-nine per cent of these will be from the "developing world". In countries such as Switzerland and Japan the average life expectancy is 77 years, 35 years more than in Afghanistan or Sierra Leone.

The short-term outlook for the one fifth of the world's population, the poorest of the poor, living in cities with no capital resources or productive land, is bleak. These people have little choice but to live in crowded, cramped housing conditions. Tuberculosis, influenza and meningitis spread quickly in these settlements, often helped by the low disease resistance amongst malnourished residents. A high proportion are disabled by diseases such as polio, or from household or workplace accidents which receive inadequate treatment.

Their makeshift settlements lack readily available water, sewerage facilities, garbage collection and primary health care services. Diarrhoea, dysentery, typhoid, intestinal parasites and food poisoning are endemic.

Certainly, poor people in Europe and North America also suffer more ill health and premature death than the rich. But in the developing countries, where a far higher proportion of the population is poor, the problem is of a much larger scale and severity. It is not surprising that the lives of these poor people is characterised by almost continuous ill-health.

Yet, well designed and implemented government actions to improve housing, infrastructure and services do not have to be expensive, and a high proportion of costs can be recovered. Indeed it is often the richer households and businesses in

cities-not the poor - who are paying far less than the real costs of publicly- provided infrastructure and services.

Where public agencies provide no water supply to low-income settlements, the poor rely on private vendors and can pay 20 to 30 times the amount per litre paid by more affluent groups with water piped into their houses. One of the most important untapped funding sources for infrastructure and services could come from charging the rich more realistic rates.

Clearly too, rather than ignoring the plight of the poor, governments can take advantage of urbanisation to achieve economies of scale in the provision of many kinds of services, so that the costs of their provision are not beyond most households' capacity to pay.

With co-operation between governments and community-based citizens groups, it is possible to tackle the most serious health problems with limited financial resources. Indeed, in many towns and cities around the world, a variety of UNCHS (Habitat) innovative projects have clearly demonstrated that low-income people can be reached with piped water, improved sanitation and drainage, health services and other improvements at low per capita costs and with good cost recovery.

In many cases these projects have shown how poor households can afford to repay small flexible loans for the purchase of land and the construction or improvement of housing. And in these schemes the level of default is usually much lower than that achieved by more traditional clients:

It is often forgotten that the remarkable decline in mortality rates and improvements in health in Europe and North America in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century owe more to improved nutrition and improvements in water supply, sanitation and other aspects of housing and living conditions than they do to medical establishments. The number of water taps in a neighbourhood are a far more reliable indication of health than the number of hospital beds. ●

(Courtesy- UNCHS)



KERALA'S DEVELOPMENT DILEMMA

K.P. Kannan.

Kerala's dilemma in its quest for a more satisfying development rests mainly in its continuing economic backwardness. The state is remarkable in terms of its achievements in social development not just in comparison to the rest of the country but to many other developing countries. Its achievements were referred to as "a shining example" to the developing world by no less a person than the world renowned economist Professor Amartya Sen. However, such a sense of elation is not noticeable within the Kerala society although people, especially the poor, are aware of what these achievements mean to them in terms of a dignified social existence. The attainment of total literacy is only a recent example of the many successful indicators of social development. Prominent among others include a demographic transition characterised by low birth rate (around 19 per thousand compared to over 31 for India) and a low death rate (around 6 as against 11 for India), a remarkably low infant mortality rate (22 as against 94 for India) and an increased life expectancy of over 70 compared to around 60 for India. Rural-urban as well as male-female differences in these indicators are not merely narrow but in many instances women have done better as in the case of life expectancy and school attendance. The spatial spread of several social and economic infrastructural facilities is one of the highest in India. Of the 17 indicators of the spread of social and economic services in the villages in different states in India, examined in the late seventies by the Central Statistical Organisation, Kerala ranked first in 12 (such as metalled road, bus stop, post office, primary school, health care centre, daily market and fair price shop - all within 2 kms - and fertilizer shop, seed store, agricultural

pump repair shop, storage and warehousing, veterinary dispensary, credit cooperative bank and commercial bank - all within 5 kms), and ranked below 6 in other indicators. On social welfare, successful organised struggles have been instrumental in instituting a number of schemes to the labouring poor including pensions and social security, child and mother care and subsidies for housing and education. No wonder that the Physical Quality of Life Index in Kerala has been rated quite high.

Where and how to go from here, is the dilemma now facing the state. If widespread achievements in social development have to be sustained, it calls for increasing expenditure and such increases will have to be greater if the problem of quality of these services have to be enhanced. The resources for such increases, especially those incurred by the state, will have to come from the development of the commodity producing sectors of the economy. However, the continuing constraints on the development of the latter calls for investments which would reduce the share of the social sector. The increasing erosion of credibility of organisational structures, especially those in the public domain, has contributed in no small measure to the intensification of this dilemma. Here an attempt is made to highlight the background and some important aspects of this dilemma.

Issues in economic backwardness are not confined to such questions as the level of per capita income. Indeed, the state's per capita income is less than that of all India as revealed by the not-so-satisfactory method of computing the state domestic product. However, there are those who argue that if the income by way of remittances to Kerala is included (widely perceived as an important source of household income since the mid-seventies), the per capita income is likely to be higher than the all India average. Given the recent trend in per capita consumption expenditure, which is only second to Punjab and higher than the estimated per capita income, there is reason to believe that Kerala may not be all that behind in income terms. This however adds to the puzzle. Why is it that with an increasing per capita income, consumption and an expanding market for a variety of agricultural products and manufactures, that the commodity producing sectors in



Kerala present a picture of stagnation? The level of house hold savings in Kerala has also been higher than the all India average and the availability of these savings for investment purposes is demonstrated by the rapid rise of the Cochin Stock Exchange as the fourth largest in the country. On the employment side the picture is a dismal one. Neither the transition that has taken place in the social sphere nor the rise in incomes has resulted in a shift in the structure of employment away from agriculture to industry, nor has it reduced the problem of un and underemployment. By all reckoning unemployment has increased among all categories and the problem of educated unemployment has intensified over the years. Notwithstanding the reduction in the intensity of poverty and probably the near elimination of its degrading dimension - thanks to the social welfare programmes of the state government - the nutritional levels continue to be lower and the pattern of morbidity accounted for by a dominance of infectious diseases.

In growth terms Kerala economy seems to have decelerated since the mid-seventies with a growth rate (less than 2 percent) of half of what was achieved during the period from early sixties to the mid-seventies. However, this low average conceals the disappointing performance of agriculture and allied sectors which registered a negative growth rate. Industrial sector's growth rate was a little over 2 percent but even that was mainly due to such infrastructural sectors as electricity generation and water supply and not due to manufacturing. It is the tertiary sector which has shown the dynamism contributing partly to the offsetting of the dismal performance of the commodity producing sectors.

A number of detailed studies have been carried out on the performance of agriculture and allied sectors. The stagnation that has been evident in agriculture could be traced to the almost total absence of any sustained increase in productivity since the mid-seventies in the face of increasing wages. For paddy, the staple diet of the people, such increase in money wages has been compounded by a decline in the relative price of rice contributing to a decline in profitability. The farmers have responded by shifting their crop mix

and attempting to increase earnings per unit of land. But the crucial initiative rests with the state to break the impasse in productivity. And that is in the realm of investment, not to speak of its seem to be divided on the causes. One school stresses the high wage character of the industrial sector and the other on the need for a well articulated industrial policy. In fact both these are interrelated and, just as in the case of the agricultural sector, there is the imperative for augmenting productivity in the industry both in existing ones as well as attracting new ones. The argument that the industrial sector in Kerala is not one of high wages in relation to the productivity is probably a limited one not in consonance with the overall trend in wages in the Kerala economy as a whole. More unrealistic would be the argument that the perceived labour militancy in Kerala is misconception. The empirical finding of a lower wage in relation to productivity is based on the data pertaining to the large industries in the organised sector and such a lower average figure was contributed by a higher share of low wage and labour intensive food processing sector. Disaggregation upto the three digit level has brought out that only in one-third of the large scale industries there is a clear cut advantage for Kerala in terms of productivity being higher than wages in all India. In the small scale sector the picture is different with an overwhelming number of industries showing a higher wage in relation to productivity. In the unorganised and so called informal sector, whether of rural or urban, Kerala's wage rates are much higher than all India and especially its neighbouring states. That is because the workers in this sector have attained an unusually high degree of organisation and consequent bargaining capacity. What this means is the higher average wage in Kerala especially for the unskilled workers. But it is interesting to observe that prospective investors are not that bothered by high wages per se. After all, high money wages can be taken care of by investing in high productivity industries thus even reducing the wage in terms of product share. There is enough evidence to show that prospective investors are concerned about, among other non-labour issues, the profile of labour which, in their view, is obstructionist. For



example, the president of the Cochin Chamber of Commerce and Industry in a recent article mentioned nothing of the high wages but stated that "Kerala can enter the potential new era of accelerated industrial growth provided all the political parties subscribe to a resolute action plan designed to remove the familiar but deep-seated problems which include heavy-handed bureaucracy, appalling deficiencies in the management of infrastructure and **obstructive tactics employed by groups of outside elements in the name of trade union activity.**" This perhaps refers to the loading and unloading workers in Kerala, groups of young able-bodied men seen in all important trading/industrial centres and road junctions in both rural and urban Kerala, who are seen extorting money as wages because of their power to obstruct handling of materials. At a certain phase in the political process in the state, especially since the late sixties to early eighties, they were backed by political parties of all hues and colours for short term political gains. This has also led to a plethora of trade unions and its self-styled leaders bargaining with employers, small or big, to the point of closing down works. This was carried on to an extent that they had demanded and agitated for absorption of their workers, engaged in the initial construction work, as factory employees irrespective of their suitability for such employment. Sociologically such a phenomenon arose as result of increasing general education of the rural poor without any skill along with their increasing politicisation. This naturally led to increasing expectations and an unwillingness to work in such traditional occupations as agriculture and fishing, etc. In my opinion, these developments contributed in no small measure to project a highly anti-development and anti-people image of labour submerging its earlier phase of disciplined and hard work in mobilising and organising labour with a sense of perspective that went well beyond narrow self-interests and sectarian gains that has come to dominate Kerala for the last couple of decades. In the development of this phenomenon, the example of the organised white collar employees in public sector demonstrated what can be achieved by narrow economism and sectarian interests.

Since the mid-eighties there has been an increasing awareness of the counter-productive nature (not just in the economic sense but even political terms) of these trends and the damage that Kerala could suffer in the long run. That initiatives to redress, albeit slowly, came from the Leftist ministry since 1987 is also interesting. The boldest of them are in the sphere of industry and industrialisation. It is understood that several Memoranda of Understanding have been signed with industrialists from all over India promising to bring into Kerala fresh investments worth more than a thousand crore of rupees. Through effective interventions, a number of public sector manufacturing units have been brought out of their loss making habit. Successful efforts were made to reopen some of the closed private sector units. The pace of international technical collaboration and equity investment has been increasing. The state government made several efforts, as yet unsuccessful, to set up a Growth Fund to utilise the remittances for investment purposes. On the labour front, there is awareness and even open appeals from dominant political parties exhorting workers to take a long term view of development of the state. Examples of restraining labour, especially those outside of the work place or factory, from obstructionist tactics are not uncommon. On the agricultural front, the Group Farming System initiated for paddy cultivation has caught the imagination of farmers as well as development planners. A streamlining and strengthening of the public distribution system for essential commodities has helped hold the price rise to some extent. On the administrative side, the holding of elections to the District Councils and the proposed decentralisation of functions has raised hopes for a more responsive and responsible bureaucratic structure.

Yet, these welcome initiatives haven't added up to a decisive break for launching a process of economic development. That is closely related, in my view, to the absence of a well articulated economic policy and planning. And here lies the dilemma of the state. To break the impasse in agricultural productivity, rethinking of policy starting from water control and land development



to agricultural research and extension would be required. The success achieved in the livestock sector in terms of improving the genetic stock and consequent enhancement of productivity as a result of successful state intervention in research and extension in artificial insemination should have provided a positive lesson as to what ought to be the state's priority in development work. The exercise in decentralised planning and administration has presented an opportunity for mobilising rural labour for asset creation in land and water. The methodology of social mobilisation is a well tried out one in Kerala but such a new course of action warrants a complete restructuring, if not abandonment, of the current methods of investment planning and project implementation through such departments as irrigation. On industrialisation, as the industrialists have perceived rightly, the problem is not one of labour alone. Here again critical infrastructure such as energy and transport, especially rail and water transport, needs to be developed and strengthened and not much has been done in these sectors in recent years except to blame those who articulate people's environmental concerns. The innumerable bureaucratic tangles involved in clearing industrial projects are not imaginary. And an unhelpful and self-serving bureaucracy is dominated by the white collar middle stratum which is seen as a hindrance to any innovative change in the system. The dependence of political parties on the organised power of this stratum has certainly added to the problem. While some welcome initiatives have been taken, the performance of the public sector is nothing less than dismal; their total loss amounts to the total equity capital! Their ills are many and the absence of professional management, fragile financial base, lack of technological dynamism are only a few. Household savings have been attracted by stock exchanges, mutual funds and commercial banks whereas there is conspicuous failure in channeling such savings for investment purposes within the state. All these point to the need for an explicitly stated industrial policy outlining the government's intentions, incentives, organisational innovations and the areas where it seeks new investments. Policies on technological change in the existing

industries cannot any longer be postponed, or can be postponed only at their slow elimination as in the case of coir manufacturing. Technological change, both from the point of existing wage levels and long term competitiveness, has become imperative. At the same time such changes also call for an employment programme that will take care of the unemployed, especially the rural unemployed women. Rural development programmes in agriculture, livestock, etc offer scope for creation of such an employment programme through the decentralised planning and administrative system. At the same time, the state has to make up its mind on the urge for a qualitative change in the social sectors. Qualitative changes in education and health cannot come about, without additional investment. And this would call for a re-examination of the all encompassing subsidy given to these sectors. The case for restricting the subsidy to the poorer segments of the society is getting increasingly strong as is evident in the growth of the private sector in these two sectors.

All these call for a break from the old, established and outmoded, though safer, ways of thinking and acting. The dilemma is that there are pulls and pressures from different sides both among and within political parties who are the leading actors. As a way out, the issue of Centre-State financial relations was projected as the root cause for the state's economic ills. But this has not gone down well with the people. There is no denying of the fact that the financial resource crunch of the state is partly due to the unfavorable mechanisms and policies pursued by the Centre for financial redistribution. To this has added the decreasing share of the state (less than 2 percent) in investment by the Central Government. While a restructuring of the federal financial relations would certainly go a long way in finding additional resources for states like Kerala, there should not be any denying of the fact that much of the initiatives have to come from within the state to break out of its current impasse in economic development. And such initiatives need to be imaginative enough to build on the strengths of the state, especially its achievements in social development. ●

People and Development

Mud needs no introduction



In a country where 70% of the population already lives in mud structures, mud as a building material needs no introduction. However mud has lost legitimacy as a valid building material amongst the urbanites. Thus promoting expensive and environmentally detrimental construction materials - making housing beyond the reach of the common man.

A mini revolution is now taking place in the world of housing. As a result of research and promotional work done by ASTRA during the past 15 years and the recent propagation of mud architecture by HUDCO, middle income home builders are increasingly taking to mud construction on their own. Factories, residences of business men, government employees and above all the Karnataka Housing Board is now constructing over 1000 houses in mud blocks. A new trade of manufacture of stabilized mud blocks is coming up generating employment.

For a simple reason. Stabilized mud blocks are strong, nice to look at and much cheaper than burnt bricks. Good clean finish and edges and low water permeability allows attractive exposed brick exterior. What is more, local labour can mould the blocks at the site itself. Finally, three tons of firewood, otherwise consumed in burning bricks, is saved for every 40 sqm of space built.

For those who want an environmental house, sun dried bricks still provide a legitimate solution.

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